



de Blasio, governor Cuomo and attorney general Schneiderman launch Tenant Harassment Prevention Task Force

March 09, 2015 - Front Section

Governor Andrew Cuomo, attorney general Eric Schneiderman and mayor Bill de Blasio revealed the launch of a joint enforcement task force, titled the Tenant Harassment Prevention Task Force, to investigate and bring enforcement actions - including criminal charges - against landlords who harass tenants. Tenant harassment complaints in Housing Court have nearly doubled since 2011. The task force will confront the rise in complaints that landlords are using a variety of tactics, including disruptive and dangerous renovation and construction projects, to force tenants into vacating rent-regulated apartments.

Previously, when owners have neglected their buildings and allowed them to fall into extreme disrepair, the N.Y.C. Department of Buildings and Department of Housing Preservation and Development have used their enforcement powers to ensure compliance with housing and building codes, while cases involving harassment and rent regulation have been handled by New York State's Division of Homes & Community Renewal Tenant Protection Unit (TPU), which was created by Governor Cuomo in 2012 to investigate landlord patterns and practices of harassment and illegal profiteering. The new task force will conduct joint cellar-to-roof inspections, coordinate enforcement actions, and when necessary, speed the prosecution of predatory landlords who purposefully distress properties as a form of harassment in order to displace tenants and deregulate rent-stabilized apartments.

"Every New Yorker deserves a safe, affordable, and decent place to live," said Cuomo. "Working with our partners in the state and city, and building upon the success of the Tenant Protection Unit, we will further crack down on unscrupulous and unlawful practices and ensure that tenants' rights remain protected."

"Most landlords are law-abiding and responsible, but as the real-estate market in New York City heats up we have seen an influx of bad actors looking to turn a fast buck," said Schneiderman.

"A thriving real estate market is no excuse for tenant harassment. Make no mistake about this: My office will pursue landlords who knowingly or intentionally threaten the health and safety of their tenants to the full extent of the law, including bringing criminal charges against them. If you treat your law-abiding tenants like criminals, we will not hesitate to make you one."

"We won't sit idly by while bad actors push out the families that have built our neighborhoods. With the State and City combining efforts, we can prevent displacement and help tenants stay in their homes. Combined with the free legal representation we're providing to thousands of tenants, this new task force will add muscle to our fight against tenant harassment and our efforts to protect rent-stabilized apartments," said Mayor Bill de Blasio.

Since its inception, the New York State TPU has recaptured more than 37,000 unlawfully

deregulated apartments, returning them to rent regulation. The TPU's successes led to the mobilization of the Tenant Harassment Prevention Task Force to coordinate those prosecutions, to bring maximum pressure on predatory landlords trying to displace tenants to raise rents and deregulate rent-stabilized apartments.

"Renovating an apartment building is critical to preserving affordability, but to use that as an excuse and opportunity to harass tenants is unacceptable," Homes & Community Renewal Commissioner and CEO Darryl C. Towns said. "When an owner rehabs a building, the goal is to improve conditions and services - not destroy them. The TPU, and other state and city agencies, know the difference between legitimate rehab and illegal harassment, and a landlord will be held legally liable if he crosses that line."

"HPD will not stand by while landlords use illegal construction and other tactics to make buildings hazardous and unlivable in order to harass tenants out of their homes," said Housing Preservation and Development Commissioner Vicki Been. "Our partnership with the Attorney General, the State's Division of Homes & Community Renewal, and other city agencies gives us the ability to address tenant harassment in a comprehensive and aggressive manner. We are committed to using all of our enforcement tools to prevent displacement, stem the tide of deregulation, and hold owners accountable to the fullest extent of the law."

"While I am encouraged to see an increase in building permits that will help to meet the housing needs of New Yorkers, the Department will continue to work with our partner agencies to proactively investigate and identify bad actors that seek to undermine the development process," said Department of Buildings Commissioner Rick Chandler. "Tenant harassment is unacceptable and we will ensure that every action available in the Building Code is enforced to prevent nuisance construction that unnecessarily displaces residents."

"Aggressive renovation practices harass tenants and can also put children and families at risk by exposing them to lead paint dust, construction dust and asbestos materials," said New York City Health Commissioner Mary Travis Bassett. "The Health Department works closely with the task force and building occupants to identify hazardous renovations and order building owners to clean up and work safely to protect the health of residents."

"Tenants in our city that are harassed and neglected by their landlords, left to live in substandard conditions and fear displacement, deserve full protection under the law, including our penal code," said Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams. "Since I have taken office, I have spoken with advocates, elected officials and everyday Brooklynites about the need to criminally prosecute predatory landlords, who treat fines as the cost of doing business. Tenants need to know their rights, and government needs to advance those rights, especially when their basic health and safety are at risk. I applaud Mayor de Blasio, Attorney General Schneiderman, and Commissioner Towns for taking this necessary action to combat tenant harassment, and I pledge my office's full support in furthering this effort that will help preserve our at-risk affordable housing stock."

I applaud Mayor de Blasio and Attorney General Schneiderman for developing this much needed task force, which will protect countless New Yorkers from being displaced from their homes," said Council Member Jumaane D. Williams (D-Brooklyn), Deputy Leader and Chair of the Council's Committee on Housing and Buildings. "While there are plenty of landlords across this city who do the right thing by their tenants, we know there are select bad actors that make life hard in a city where finding affordable housing is a challenge. I look forward to working with the Tenant Protection Task Force to limit harassment and combat those landlords who will do virtually anything to evict

tenants and withdraw units from the protections that rent regulation provides. Today sends a clear message to all landlords that this city will not allow such egregious behavior, and that we will serve and protect all tenants throughout the five boroughs."

"The tactics these landlords use are unethical and illegal and we will not stand by while landlords attempt to profit off our displacement," said Donna Mossman, a rent-regulated tenant and member of the Crown Heights Tenant Union. "I want to thank Attorney General Schneiderman, Mayor de Blasio, and Commissioner Towns for their commitment to tenants and for joining forces in the fight against landlords who harass tenants in our communities."

"Harassment and displacement of tenants is a serious and growing concern in Brooklyn and across the City," said Edward Josephson, Director of Litigation for Legal Services NYC. "Legal Services NYC applauds the formation of this Task Force, which will focus government resources on this threat to affordable housing, and we look forward to working with the Task Force in its efforts to preserve our neighborhoods and protect low-income families."

In response to the booming New York City real estate market, particularly in gentrifying neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Manhattan, some property owners are using harassment to force current occupants to vacate their apartments in order to fetch higher rents or convert rent-regulated buildings to luxury condominiums. Under rent regulation, when a tenant vacates a rent-regulated apartment, the owner can automatically increase rents by 20 percent, and further increase rents by making apartment improvements. If the rent gets higher than \$2,500 per month, the apartment automatically exits the rent regulation system and rent can be raised dramatically.

The task force is executing unannounced and joint inspections of buildings in New York City where landlords and management companies are suspected of using construction as a means to harass tenants. Following multiple joint on-site property inspections, the task force agencies have already substantiated a number of tenant complaints and the task force has several on-going investigations. The member agencies will pursue evidence of illegal acts, and lodge enforcement actions.

Incidents of harassment include:

- Landlords operating without proper permits;
- Construction projects operating in violation of stop work orders;
- Landlords who openly ignore requirements for tenant protection plans in order to contain the spread of lead and/or asbestos which may be exposed during renovation;
- Landlords removing essential systems, such as boilers and venting systems, in order to make life unbearable for existing residents.

In recent months, enforcement agencies in New York, including the Attorney General's office, TPU, and HPD, have received a significant uptick in complaints regarding tenant harassment. The task force is primarily concerned with harassment claims that involve both sanctioned and non-sanctioned construction projects that endanger the health and safety of existing occupants.

In response, the city and state and agencies, along with the Office of the Attorney General, came together to pool resources and crack down on the most dangerous and chronic violators.

Tenants should continue to lodge complaints to HPD and DOB through 311. They may also report complaints online at www.ag.ny.gov/complaint-forms.